



SERMON BALAK: EVIL TWINS

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 1 July 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue – *b'nei mitzvah of Ava and Asher*

1 In Hebrew, ‘and’ is וְ. It gets plonked onto the front of a word, so ‘Ava and Asher’ in Hebrew would be וְאָשֶׁר וְאָוָה. Or would it? Because there’s a special rule in Hebrew that when ‘and’ comes between two things that form a close pair with each other – day and night, gold and silver, horse and rider – it’s actually וּ, not וְ.¹ The two of you, I think we can safely say, form a close pair, so you’d be וְאָשֶׁר וְאָוָה.

2 Another pair of words that receive the special וּ treatment is ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Now, we might argue that they’re not a pair at all – they’re opposites – but maybe being opposites makes them even more of a pair.

3 In particular, the trope of ‘an evil twin’ is very prominent throughout literature, mythology and all forms of

storytelling. There's something gripping and fascinating about the idea that there's someone very similar to us, but different in one crucial respect.

4 Even Moses, we're told, had an evil twin. And that evil twin was Balaam, whose story you told, between you, so confidently this morning. The rabbis explain:ⁱⁱ "Everything that God revealed to Moses, God also revealed to Balaam. Why? Because God knew that, in the future, the other nations would say, 'If only You had given us a prophet as like Moses, we would have had a chance of receiving the Torah and of being Your chosen people.' Therefore, the Holy One gave them Balaam, who was as great and wise as Moses. But Balaam never reached Moses's level of righteousness – and he sought to destroy."

5 In the end, as we know, Moses 'won'. He won without, really, lifting a finger. And Balaam 'lost': he lost not just the opportunity to take Torah to the nations of the world, but he lost his own individual freedom. His story ended with him becoming a



sad puppet, reciting words put into his mouth against his will.

Beautiful words, no doubt, words with which we start every serviceⁱⁱⁱ – מֵהַטֹּבוֹ אֶהְלִיךָ יַעֲקֹב – but not his words. There is no doubt that he lost.

6 The thing is, though, that it seems like such an artificial competition. A totally contrived rivalry. If there was only one Torah, and it either had to go to the Israelites or to someone else, then either Moses or Balak was destined for failure. They were set up to fail.

7 Now, Asher and Ava, both of you wrote to me before today, and both of you highlighted the importance of friends in your life. But you didn't just say that you like your friends. You both, independently, said something very similar, and very important. Ava, you wrote: "They cheer me up and make me happier." And Asher, wrote: "If I have worries I share them, and the soon fly out of the window." (The worries fly out of the window, that is: not your friends.)



8 What you both rightly observed is that friendship is relational, not transactional. We like to have friends not just because it makes us happy, but because the relationship grows and helps both parties. Just like Ava and Asher are connected with the ᵛ of relationship, so too is a person and their friend.

9 And while the trope of ‘evil twins’ is well-known and much-used, there are other narratives that appear as well. Lorena Stookey, in her study of world mythology, reminds us that there is an alternative.^{iv} “In some narratives twins embody the opposing powers of good and evil,” she says, “but in others they represent the harmonious conjunction of complementary powers.” If we wanted to say something simpler than “the harmonious conjunction of complementary powers”, we could really just summarise it as: people being nice and working together.

10 The Jewish tradition venerates Moses. He’s called wise, pure, noble, treasured... We were very lucky to have him. But now think: there were two of him! There were two people on earth,



simultaneously, with Moses's qualities. Just think what they could have achieved hand-in-hand, if they hadn't been set against each other.

11 The two of you, I can tell from your notes to me, are not going to make the same mistake. You understand the power of people working together. Indeed, the very fact that you've had the first joint b'nei mitzvah here at BHPS for decades, and worked together so effectively in front of everyone, demonstrates and symbolises that. You've both done yourselves proud, and we wish you **מזל טוב**.

ⁱ Gesenius, 104g

ⁱⁱ Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Zuta 10

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 24:5

^{iv} Lorena Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004): 189.

